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Zeroing In on Prime Suspects

New allegations about a spy, and a KGB man defects

Even by the shadowy standards of international espionage, where hardly anything is simple and nothing is ever certain, the case of Geoffrey Arthur Prime confounds. At its heart, it remains a question of what Prime, a onetime translator at Britain's top-secret electronic intelligence center at Cheltenham, may or may not have given to the Soviet Union over the course of 13 years. But by the end of last week, that mystery was further clouded by worrisome reports in American newspapers, longstanding suspicions between the U.S. and British intelligence communities, and the special provisions of Britain's Official Secrets Act.

The scandal first erupted in July, when Prime, 44, was arrested and charged with violating Section 1 of the Official Secrets Act. A Russian-language specialist, Prime had worked at Cheltenham from 1968 to 1977. The top-secret facility, dubbed GCHQ (for Government Communications Headquarters), receives and analyzes data from a worldwide network of spy bases, ships, planes and satellites. Though officials refused to detail the accusations against Prime, the section of the act under which he was charged deals with, among other things, the passing of secret codes and documents to a potential enemy.

But Prime was not of interest just to London. Cheltenham is part of a four-nation intelligence web that includes the U.S., Canada and Australia; GCHQ swaps much of its data with the National Security Agency (NSA), Washington's top electronic eavesdropping organization. At the time of Prime's arrest, both NSA and Central Intelligence Agency officials were not overly concerned. The U.S. (and probably Britain) changed many of its worldwide codes, and Washington then waited to hear from London on how much damage Prime had done.

Last week stories in both the New York Times and the Washington Post attempted to answer that question. The Times reported that, according to U.S. intelligence officials, Prime may be "responsible for one of the longest and potentially most damaging Soviet penetrations of Western intelligence since World War II." The next day the Post offered more details: Prime had allegedly compromised NATO code-breaking techniques, identified clandestine NATO agents, and pinpointed for Moscow the locations of all British and U.S. nuclear warheads and the day-by-day armed readiness of every NATO division. Prime, according to the Post, "may have done more damage to

Western intelligence than any Russian operative" since the days of Kim Philby, the Cambridge graduate who, after being unmasked as a Soviet agent, fled to Moscow in 1963.

The reports immediately caused an uproar across the Atlantic. But if reaction in London was swift, it was also expressed somewhat awkwardly. Not only does the Official Secrets Act prohibit the publication of details of espionage cases, but British law forbids disclosure of facts about any criminal case not yet brought to trial. Prime, for example, has not been mentioned by name in the British press since he was formally charged in July. Nonetheless, Members of Parliament angrily demanded last week that the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher respond to the U.S. newspaper allegations. But Thatcher remained unbending. She informed Parliament, in writing, that she would not discuss the matter until Prime's trial, which is scheduled to open late this month, ends and the case is out of the courts.

How much damage did Prime do? Although the answer may never be known, U.S. intelligence officials speculate that Prime, by passing on to the Soviets details of what he had been asked to translate, enabled them to work out which of their codes had been broken and what information had been compromised. By giving the Soviets clues about Western monitoring capabilities, Prime might have paved the way for a disinformation campaign by the KGB.

Many officials, however, doubt that Prime was in a position to do the sort of damage that Philby did. Says a senior U.S. intelligence official: "Unless there is some great hidden surprise here of which I've had no hint, I can't believe we're talking about a problem of the same magnitude." Several U.S. intelligence insiders pointed out a number of inaccuracies in the press accounts. NATO, for example, is not in the business of breaking codes and does not have any agents. As senior British officials told TIME, the charges about NATO secrets were "fanciful and greatly exaggerated."

Nevertheless, the Thatcher government still faces a thicket of unanswered questions. Did Prime, for example, have any accomplices? Though the suspect stopped working at Cheltenham in 1977, he is charged with passing secrets to the Soviets through 1981: how could he have done so if he did not have at least one other person aiding him? The incident confirms what many U.S. intelligence experts have long feared: the British have never fully heeded Washington's pleas to tight-

en up their security. Cheltenham employees, for example, are not subjected to regular polygraph tests, as are their American counterparts. Noted one former CIA director acidly: "For some reason—their arrogance, or class structure or whatever—they do not keep an eye on their people."

Not all the news for Western spooks last week was bad. Two days before the Prime scandal broke open again, the British announced the defection of Vladimir Kuzichkin, 35, a senior KGB operative who was last posted in Tehran. Exactly what Kuzichkin did in Iran remains unclear. British sources said he was responsible for organizing hundreds of agents within the country's outlawed Communist Tudeh Party. Though the British are also keeping mum on why and how Kuzichkin quit, Iranian sources claim he was a "reluctant defector." According to this report, he was running agents in Iran when, through a blunder, he led them into a trap set by the Islamic Guards. Faced with retribution from Moscow, Kuzichkin, diplomatic passport in hand, opted instead to fly to London.

Not only did the British reveal Kuzichkin's existence and identity, but, through leaks at Whitehall, they encouraged the belief that he was a much coveted catch. Kuzichkin, who is currently being debriefed at a safe house in the Sussex countryside, may indeed turn out to be quite valuable. But there were suspicions both in Washington and London that Whitehall knew in advance of the damaging leaks about Prime and timed its announcement regarding Kuzichkin to blunt the bad news about the Cheltenham mole.

—By James Kelly. Reported by Frank Melville/London and Christopher Redman/Washington